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The Ethnographic Challenge of Masorti Religiosity Among Israeli Jews

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RESUMÉ

Le défi ethnographique de la religiosité masorti parmi les juifs d’Israël

L’ethnographie n’a guère porté attention à la vie religieuse des Israéliens appelés masorti – traditionnels – qui résistent à être étiquetés comme « religieux » ou « non religieux ». Diverses rencontres avec des juifs originaires de Lybie, en relation avec la place des femmes dans les rituels publics, montrent la variété des orientations masorti. La vie masorti est aussi mise au défi par les normes orthodoxes, un processus en cours qui invite à d’autres plongées ethnographiques.


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Masorti is a broad descriptive term characterizing an approach to Judaism (beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors) shared by many Jewish Israelis. 1 The term appears in everyday speech, in the media, and in social science research. This was not always so. A general perception regarding Israeli Jews, when the state was founded, was that they were divided simply into those who were dati – religious or observant, and those who were not. Terms describing non-religious Israeli Jews were lo-dati (not religious), hiloni (secular), or hofshi (“free” an older term implying “free from a binding obligation to religious rules and rabbinic authority”).

The term masorti – normally translated “traditional” – became widespread during the first decades of the state’s existence. To a large extent it was attributed to Middle Eastern Jews who immigrated in great numbers when Israel was established. The histories of these groups varied, especially the degree to which they were exposed to European cultural influences, political domination, or colonial settlement; but most did not experience the religious and identity challenges faced by European Jews following upon Emancipation. They did not see themselves as divided into different “kinds” of Jews, whether reflecting a range of religious orientations – Reform through Orthodox – as in Central Europe, or the sharp distinction between the religious and non-religious that was more characteristic of Eastern Europe. When they were asked, in casual or formal situations, whether they were “religious” or “not religious”, the question often was not understood or was confusing.

There was little ethnographic documentation of this early situation; instead, I offer some personal observations. In the 1970s I heard from Yaakov Guweta, who had been the principal of a Jewish school in Benghazi, that when he arrived more than 20 years before and was asked whether he was dati or lo-dati, neither category made sense to him. He was not comfortable answering dati, which he perceived to mean that he was very pious, strictly following every detail of the commandments, but neither could he readily answer lo-dati, as if he ate non-kosher food and distanced himself from the synagogue [Goldberg, 1996: 44]. Guweta succeeded in making the dilemma explicit, but many immigrants did not. My first encounter with this challenge was a 1959 interchange I witnessed between a
young man, born in a rural community south of Tripoli (Libya) who then resided in an immigrant village in southern Israel, and two interlocutors from European backgrounds connected to the National Religious (dati-lemmi) strand of Zionism. When they asked him why he no longer wore a skull-cap (kipa), he retorted: ani lo dati, ani mapai – I am not religious I am Mapai— referring to the Labor Zionist party that dominated Israel in its first decades. The bemused paternalistic response of the two Ashkenazi (European) men that followed revealed their attitude that the young man was not sophisticated enough to grasp the difference between religion and politics. It is now arguable that his pithy response was indeed a veridical perception of the entrenched situation in Israel where religion and politics went hand-in-hand. For our purpose, we underline the clash of understandings in early years, a situation that eventually pushed toward the emergence of a new category —masorti.

This anecdote also underscores that those who did not seem to grasp, or locate themselves within, the supposedly obvious dati/lo-dati distinction were seen as culturally lagging behind old-timers to whom the contrast was common sense. This continued to be the case even as the category of masorti became widespread and conventional. An iconic Israeli image encapsulating masorti behavior envisioned a male attending synagogue on Shabbat morning and going to a soccer match in the afternoon, an activity incongruous with the spirit of Shabbat observance even when it did not entail violating an explicit Sabbath prohibition like driving or purchasing a ticket to the match.

We argue that the notion of masorti religiosity deserves more research attention, especially more ethnography. While further illustrating the notion, we also indicate that it was largely overlooked by sociological studies. Only recently has it attracted historical analysis, merited philosophical inquiry, and entered into focused survey research on current trends that picks up from earlier ethnographic initiatives. Viewed broadly, relevant ethnographic reporting has appeared in two distinct directions: diffuse anecdotes highlighting religious behavior that defies the dati/lo-dati dichotomy and accounts of seemingly “exotic” religious behavior, especially pilgrimages, lying on the margins of text-based orthodoxy.

The ethnography of masorti patterns thus is unfulfilled desiderata on several levels. First, it is worthwhile adding more pieces to the still-puzzling picture of what constituted masorti orientations and habitus among first-generation immigrants to Israel. Second, with evidence that such orientations have not disappeared, but have changed (and are changing) in form and also have become more self-aware, it is important to keep an ethnographic finger on the pulse of these developments. Finally, I argue that by documenting earlier masorti patterns, and also tracking the ways they have been challenged but still succeed in asserting themselves anew, we gain insights not only into strands of masorti religiosity, but also into broader religious trends impinging upon Israeli society.

■ Glimpses of Masorti religiosity

I continue by depicting a combination of activities that would be deemed “inconsistent” by many Israelis. In the early 1980s, I was in the northern town of Shlomi, populated by many Moroccan families, during the Simhat Torah festival when the annual cycle of reading the Torah in the synagogue is concluded and begun anew. A special honor —hatan torah— was given to a certain man, selecting him to recite blessings when the concluding Torah portion was ceremoniously read. Following local custom, the hatan torah then invited many congregants to his home where he served an elaborate meal to express appreciation for having received the honor. He was in high spirits, urging guests to drink and eat, and suddenly switched on the radio to add music to the occasion. Observant dati Israelis do not turn on radios on Sabbaths or Festivals, and in the midst of his spontaneous gesture, the honoree offered a rapid justification —sensing that not all his guests might approve— saying “it’s permissible to listen to the radio on Festivals (as opposed to Sabbaths), right?” He was not correct, from the perspective of orthodox norms, but also did not tarry to wait for an answer. The eating and drinking continued, and those present did not react to this minimally awkward moment where the possibility of a clash between “tradition” and rabbinic halakha arose. In this series of events we detect both the continued energy of a masorti habitus, and the concomitant awareness that it does not always “fit” into the normative expectations of other Israelis.

In many instances it is assumed that behavior designated as masorti is more lenient —entailing fewer rabbinic strictures— than the norms encoded in halakha. This, however, is not always the case, as exemplified in

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the realm of gender. A central ritual marking the initiation of the Sabbath is the recitation of the *qiddush*—sanctification—prayer at the start of the Friday night meal. Normally, the *qiddush* is recited by the male head of a household (another point of initiation is when women light Sabbath candles earlier in the evening). If no adult male is present, rabbinic law allows the *qiddush* to be recited by women. In a neighborhood in Jerusalem, including many households where elderly widows from Middle Eastern regions like Kurdistan or Yemen lived alone, Susan Sered [1992] found that they never took advantage of this *halakhic* opportunity, based on their firm assumption that a woman reciting *qiddush* simply is “not done.” These widows would be sure to find a household, like that of a son, at which to “drop by” on Friday night to hear *qiddush* recited by a male, even if they did not remain throughout the Sabbath meal. We later will discuss other gender-linked behaviors that illustrate different instances of strain between Orthodox demands and traditional conventions, but simply stress here the power of traditional norms to shape behavior *vis-à-vis* rabbinic principles, both in instances of *halakhic* leniency and of added strictness.

Observers of Israeli life could add anecdotes that expand and elaborate the picture of *masorti* behavior as it took root in Israel’s early decades, but it only occasionally appeared in systematic research. In a paper based on data gathered in an Israeli town in 1956, where both European and Yemenite Jews lived [Katz and Zloczower, 1961], sociologists repeatedly utilized the term “traditional” to depict religiosity in Yemenite families in the context of relations between children and parents, but did not explore the notion conceptually nor use it as a label characterizing a religious life-style. The authors did acknowledge that research on immigrant groups ought to pay more attention to ethnic differences and cultural factors, but did not embark upon that task. The classification of the background of immigrants, as coming from “modern,” “traditional,” or “transitional” settings, was basic to the approach to immigration set forth by S. N. Eisenstadt [1954], but the rubric “tradition” in that scheme contained little cultural content. There were no definable groups in Israel identifying as “traditional”; *masorti* was an attribute of a diffuse range of religious-oriented acts to which it was difficult to assign a specific ethnographic context.

Only in the 1980s did anthropologist Moshe Shokeid [1984a, 1984b] provide an account seeking to make sense of behavior which by that time was labeled *masorti*. Katz and Zloczower [1961: 304] had cautiously used the term “inconsistencies” in discussing religious behavior among Yemenite Jews, placing the term in inverted commas, while Shokeid [1984b: 88], a generation later, still noted that traditional Jews “never developed a consistent set of behavioral rules or philosophical justifications to their mixed secularist-religious style.” By that time, the term *masorti* regularly appeared in social surveys, but there was limited systematic descriptive material elaborating its varied layers of meaning.

More recently, there have emerged insights from the perspectives of several disciplines. Zvi Zohar’s analyses of decision-making in matters of *halakha* [2001], among rabbis in Middle Eastern countries in modern times, points to a sense of tradition that held within it possibilities and flexibilities not found in the orthodox approaches cultivated among Jews in Europe. More recently, Meir Buzaglo [2009] has offered a philosophical inquiry into *masorti* orientations. Yaacov Yadgar and Charles Liebman [2009] grasped that as time passed in Israel, *masorti* religious styles should no longer be viewed as historical inertia, but reflected active religious choices, and orientations toward current realities in Israel, that should be viewed in their own terms. 

Subsequently, the substance of *masorti* orientations and identities were researched in greater depth by Yadgar [2010, 2012], mostly through survey-type research.

Evolving contexts of traditionalism

There is now growing recognition that a binary view of Israeli Jews as being either *dati* or *lo-dati* is inaccurate and misleading [Yonah and Goodman 2004; Goldberg et al., 2012]. As stated above, ethnography that takes *masorti* religiosity seriously constitutes an important research challenge. This includes a dynamic view of the subject as intersecting with other thrusts within Israeli religiosity-secularism. As further suggested, the realm of gender, suffused with religious meanings and issues, provides a significant field for following such religious developments. We thus further present *masorti* like anecdotal data, based on observations from several decades ago, placed in the context of recent trends accessible to ethnographic assessment today. This diachronic perspective highlights the interweaving of gender and religion over time, partially reflecting “negotiation” between *masorti* orientations and other

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ideological and behavioral religious stances. But before presenting these anecdotes, two other background fields need mentioning to provide contexts for tracing the evolution of masorti patterns.

First, much as masorti religious styles characterized immigrants from Middle Eastern backgrounds, many people of that provenance – especially youngsters in Israeli educational frameworks – moved solidly into one of the two streams of Orthodoxy: the National Religious (dati leumi also called “Zionist Religious”) stream and ultraorthodox –haredi – ways of life [Goldberg et al., 2012]. Each constitutes a “story” in itself that will not be pursued here, but should be kept in mind as reference poles (both – and simultaneously – positive and negative) for those continuing along masorti paths. A complementary point is that the “hard-to-def ine” (or “inconsistent” etc.) quality of masorti “tradition” is not only in its placement “in between” religion and secularity, but in counterpoint to each of these two main streams of Jewish orthodoxy.

Regarding Religious Zionism, a principled political decision taken in 1953 formalized two streams of State Education, one “general” and the other State Religious Education. Many immigrant youngsters, and Israeli-born children of immigrants, were channeled into these frameworks based on the claim (that also had political dimensions) that they were more fitting for children coming from “traditional” backgrounds and families, characteristic of Middle Eastern communities, than were the ideals and atmosphere of the “secular” schools. In State Religious schools, a religious way of life (including regular prayer, for example) was part of the daily routine. In this context, many children from Middle Eastern backgrounds encountered situations in which practices and beliefs that were taken for granted in their families and communities were looked down-upon by educators hailing from the original European background of the National Religious movement. Some internal discussions within the educational establishment at the time provide evidence of appreciating this dilemma, but have left little trace in the ethnographic record. There is no doubt, however, that this internal strain left a mark on many children from masorti backgrounds, whatever religious course they eventually chose to follow.

With regard to haredi directions, many fewer children from Middle Eastern homes entered haredi schools, that had a special (ideologically and politically complex) status of not being state schools, but “recognized” by the state and at the same time able to pursue their ultraorthodox curriculum that often included a rejection of Zionism. Haredi institutions were (and are) a bastion of Ashkenazi culture that thrived in Eastern Europe (including the use of Yiddish), and while eager to augment their numbers by incorporating children from other backgrounds, they made little room for non-Ashkenazim either conceptually or in terms of personal advancement in their institutions of higher learning. This blocked mobility was a factor in the emergence of the Shas party, which defined itself as both Ultraorthodox and Sephardi being led by the venerable Sephardic rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, that rose rapidly in electoral prominence from the mid-1980s on [Goldberg et al., 2012: 7]. At first many Israelis of Sephardi or Middle Eastern provenance voted for Shas, even when not personally espousing a haredi way of life, because they perceived the party and the image of Ovadiah Yosef as restoring public pride to Sephardi culture. At the same time, there recently has developed perceptible tension between Shas ideology and religious demands, articulated in Yosef’s goal of establishing a uniform halakhic regime for all Jews in Israel based on Sephardi tradition, and the wish of many masortim to hold on to their particular ethnic traditions. Once, at a public gathering celebrating their immigration to Israel, one Libyan Jew spontaneously pointed out to me, with satisfaction, that I won’t find many Shas supporters among Libyan Jews. Whether his claim was statistically correct or not, in comparison to other Maghreb-based groups, I do not know. It does indicate that Israelis who view themselves as masorti continue to jostle against other Israeli streams, each with their own mélange of secularity and religiosity, which present themselves as clear and coherent ideological positions.

In addition to these orthodox fields of putatively pure religious directions, our discussion will be abetted by considering an Israeli arena replete with “traditionalism.” We refer to hillulot –annual celebrations featuring pilgrimages to the gravesites of sainted rabbis. In contrast to the sporadic ethnographic anecdotes mobilized to illuminate masorti religiosity vis-à-vis halakha, hillula (singular) festivities, which are isolable events in time and space, have attracted extensive ethnographic attention. They are diverse, and literature regarding them, both historically and in Israel, is now wide-ranging. The following brief summary aims to advance understanding of masorti religiosity.

The archetype of sainted rabbis is Rabbi Shim’on Bar Yohai, a second-century sage who is the putative
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Within this general pattern there was great variation. In the eastern Maghreb there were examples of sanctified “objects,” like a synagogue in Djerba [Valensi and Udovitch, 1984], or a Torah Scroll in Derna near Benghazi that functioned as personified tzaddikim. Hillulot also are dynamic phenomena. The introduction of “modern” motorized transportation in Morocco led to growth in the numbers of people attending these “traditional” events. Evolution continued in Israel, where several trajectories of continuity emerged [Bilu, 2010]. One was the “transfer” of former Maghribi sites of veneration to the landscape of Israel, another was the development of old-new hillulot in the Israeli context (the colorful Talmudic figure Honi Ha-Me`agel emerging as a tzaddik in the Galilean development town Hatzor), and a third was the creation of hillulot around known venerated rabbis who passed away in Israel (most prominently Rabbi Yisrael Abu-Hatseira—Baba Sulî—who was born in Morocco and now is buried in Netivot; [Bilu and Ben-Ari, 1992; see Hidiroglou, this issue]. As noted, the behavior at hillulot do not stem from canons of halakhic ritual activity, but because these sites attract thousands of enthusiastic worshippers seeking contact with the holy, rabbinic authorities in Israel have had to relate to them. As such they are arenas in which “traditional” practices and halakhic norms bounce off one another, returning us to the theme of contemporary masorti patterns.

■ Challenges to Masorti gender orientations

Evolving masorti directions are noticeable in the realm of gender, particularly in norms regarding contact between the sexes [Yadgar, 2012]. In various religious and rabbinic sectors in Israel one now sees escalating strictness limiting public contact between men and women, but rarely have the details of this development been subject to a systematic ethnographic eye. I begin with observations from the 1980s. One hillula, newly established in Israel in a synagogue of Libyan Jews in Netanya, celebrated an unusual Torah Scroll (originating from Derna) that was called zghair derna [“the little [one] of Derna” (the town in Cyrenaica)], because it was strikingly small. This scroll had also been an object of veneration in North Africa, carrying a halo of tales of how it survived destruction at the hands of nature and...
of wanton men. In a manner not fully explained, the scroll was removed from Libya after the exodus of Jews between 1949 and 1951, and arrived in Israel in the early 1980s. A synagogue in Netanya was dedicated to it, and, according to the tradition from abroad, the first day of the month of Elul was selected for its first and (subsequent) annual hillula. I attended the first celebration, and again several years thereafter, yielding some observations.

The behavior paralleled other hillulot, but the fact that the celebration was tightly linked to a formally defined synagogue lent salience to certain features involving women. When I arrived, the scroll stood open on a table on a platform (bimah) in the synagogue’s center, and near it were a rabbi and several other men. Throughout the hall men were singing and dancing, and every now and then a person would approach the scroll in a gesture of devotion. Some women were in the synagogue as well, in the central section that would be closed off to them during the occasion. At times other individuals, both men and women, moved in or out of the dance circle, while others vigorously engaged in what we vernacularly call “belly dancing”.

At other hillulot, dance was noticeable because its singing was accompanied by loud drumming on a darbuka. This group stood in a circle, in the center of which a tall slender woman moved in or out of the dance circle, while one notably attractive woman continued at length. Later in the evening, when matters within the synagogue quieted somewhat, the rabbi took the opportunity to make some remarks greeting the celebrants, while heaping praise on the zghair derna. He also, in a low-keyed, indirect manner cast aspersions on “certain behaviors” not fitting the occasion; it was obvious that he meant the “belly dancing”. I did not take the occasion to interview anyone on the matter, but when I attended the hillula two or three years later no hint of this facet of the celebration remained.

On the one hand the rabbi’s criticism and pressure corresponds to concerns that rabbis had in North Africa regarding hillulot, but on another level represents new powers in the hands of Israeli rabbinate that continues to grow. After Baba Sali died in the 1984, an elaborate mausoleum was quickly erected around his grave, which I visited on the first hilulah after his death. The crowd was enormous and religious enthusiasm ran high, with men and women pressing together side-by-side to get close to the grave and throw lit candles toward it. A few years later, a formal divider was erected so that women and men approached the grave from different directions. In recent years, this pressure has succeeded in altering the physical arrangements at the classic Lag Ba’omer pilgrimage in Meron. Separate paths were laid out for men and women to enter Bar Yohai’s mausoleum—a development covered in the Israeli media. In this context, adequate ethnographic recording of the earlier traditional-masorti situation would throw important light on the new situation.

Brief insights of this nature are available not only regarding ecstatic behavior at hillulot. Two standard prayer situations, one at home and the second in a synagogue, illustrate that traditional norms of gender separation were not as demanding as in today’s orthodoxies. In the 1980s, the father of a friend living in Netanya died, and I visited his home during the week of mourning—shiv’ah. The family had originated from Benghazi; most of the older visitors had known the deceased from abroad. Men and women sat in the living room and the time for afternoon prayer approached. Barely noticeably, the men rose, turned toward Jerusalem, and someone began to lead the minha prayer. The women continued to sit, ceased their chanting, but otherwise nothing changed. In parallel orthodox settings that I know, either women would leave the room or men would move to a separate area for prayer. The situation I observed, where women remained in the room while prayer was conducted by men, seemed totally normal to the participants.

The second situation, also in Netanya, was during Sabbath prayer in a Libyan synagogue, just before the public reading from the Torah. An old practice, both in Ashkenazi and Sephardi realms, has been to “auction off” honors connected to reading the Torah, especially the privilege of reciting blessings linked to the

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public reading. This practice has disappeared in many contemporary communities, but is maintained in others where it still constitutes a mechanism for funding synagogue upkeep. That particular morning, a woman participated in the bidding from the women’s section behind the men, separated by a thin curtain. Having purchased the privilege (and gained religious merit), she designated a male member of her family to “go up” and bless the reading of the Torah at the appropriate moment. The event seemed quite routine to other participants. Subsequently, I have heard that parallel scenes took place on the Lower East Side of New York early in twentieth century. Also, the medieval Cairo Genizah documents depict a woman purchasing the honor of reading from the Scroll of Esther, for her brother, during the Purim holiday [Goitein, 1978: 24]. We do not know the concrete setting of this transaction, but can appreciate the value of precise recording of modes of religious behavior that were so taken-for-granted at the time that they barely received mention.

■ Continuation

Examples of “relaxed” gender differentiation may be less common today than in the past, and where they exist most likely reflect an intentional “traditionalism.” Our concluding contemporary example underlines the tension between masorti and orthodox perceptions and principles regarding gender separation. Jews from Libya formed the smallest of the Maghrib populations in Israel, and for many years sought wider societal recognition. Eventually, the city of Or Yehudah near Tel Aviv provided a building for a Heritage Center featuring a museum and public events [Goldberg, 2012]. People active in this initiative represent a variety of religious styles. I believe that most would fit within a masorti range, but one of the explicit purposes of the Center is to represent Libyan Jewish traditions free of current political and ideological positions. Nevertheless, one person — born in Libya and educated in orthodox Israeli yeshivot— who had contributed to cultural events in the past, will not participate in the new Center’s activities if men and women sit together at cultural gatherings. Those heading the Center’s program resist this demand, and forgo the rabbi’s potential contribution. This is not an “anti-religious” stance, but a sentiment, at times expressed explicitly but mostly remaining below the surface, that rigid orthodoxy is foreign to “our” (Libyan Jewish) way of life. It remains a challenge for context-based ethnography to document multivalent situations like these. Formulac questioning might produce only platitudes, or denials of the poignancy of the religious and identity dilemmas involved. We must move beyond the extant bits and pieces of diffuse ethnography which bear hints of important religious trends that are submerged, and seek ways of observing them surface, and of grasping their significance more fully. ■

I Notes

1. This paper was written during a Fellowship at the Frankel Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies, the University of Michigan.

2. The movement for Conservative Judaism, based mainly in the United States with some representation in Israel, chose the term Masorti for its Hebrew name, but this is a separate religious phenomenon [Goldberg et al., 2012].

3. To emphasize this, Yadgar and Liebman [2009: 188, n.1] utilize the term masorti as a noun (not an adjective), with the plural “masortim”. We partially follow this in what follows.

4. “Shot glass” is a common term referring to a small thick glass in which one serves strong liquor (whiskey, etc.) in an un-mixed (“straight”) fashion. It is a glass from which one can drink and swallow the whole contents in one swift gulp (“shot”).

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Mesas Yosef, 2000 [1934], Mayyim hayyim [Living Waters], Jerusalem, Otsarot HaMahgreb.


ABSTRACT

The Ethnographic Challenge of Masorti Religiosity Among Israeli Jews

The religious life of Israelis deemed masorti—“traditional,” who resist being labeled “religious” or “non-religious,” has received minimal ethnographic attention. Scattered encounters with Jews from Libya, relating to women in public ritual, reveal a range of masorti orientations. Masorti life is also challenged by orthodox norms, an ongoing process that invites further in-depth ethnography.

Keywords: Israel. Masorti. Middle Eastern Jews. Religious observance. Tradition.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Religiosität der Masorti – eine ethnographische Herausforderung

Es gibt kaum ethnographische Untersuchungen über das religiöse Leben der in Israel lebenden sogenannten Masorti – einer traditionellen Glaubensrichtung des Judentums, die sich dagegen sträuben als „religiös“ oder „nicht religiös“ etikettiert zu werden. Zu facettenreich ist die Religiosität der Masorti, wie beispielsweise die Interviews mit lybischen Juden oder die Rolle der Frauen in der Liturgie zeigen. Entsprechend wird die Lebensweise der Masorti durch orthodoxe Normen auf den Prüfstand gestellt; eine Tatsache, die zu weiteren ethnographischen Untersuchungen einlädt.